

“IN GOOD COMPANY”
A Sermon by Paulo Gustavo França
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
Sunday, 07 November 2004
In commemoration of All Saints’ Day
8:30 worship service
Text: Luke 6:20-31

“Do to others as you would have them do to you”
Luke 6:31 (NRSV)

Prayer

Eternal God,
Make us this day remember the unseen
Cloud of witnesses that surrounds your Church:
Those who in every age and generation
Have witnessed to their faith in life and in death.
Those who served humanity and touched our lives
At the cost of pain, of persecution, and of death.
Those whom we have loved and have gone before us to be with you
And whose names are written on our hearts.
Help us now to hear your Word attentively and receptively,
So we may run with perseverance the race that is set before us.
In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

It is providential that we, Presbyterians, are observing **All Saints’ Day** this Sunday and not on November 1 - the day prior to the presidential elections. And I should tell you that I was somewhat reluctant to make any allusion to the elections in this sermon. After all, we all have already had enough of the contentious political debates and divisive political strategies that colored this year’s presidential campaigns. Now that the election has been decided, I assume that most of us are ready to move on with our lives and, hopefully, find healing for the deep polarization left by the presidential race. However the bitter division and fervor that marked the marathon race to the White House seem to

have revealed an undeniable “**dichotomy of outlooks**” among Americans. The calcified ideological distinctions between **REDS** and **BLUES** cemented allegiance among people of like minds and common interests and energized political foes with an amazingly powerful magnetic force. Unfortunately, these deep-seated sociopolitical divisions are not likely to go away now that the presidential election is behind us. Beyond any shadow of doubt, this kind of visceral antagonism between entrenched political factions is bound to affect the Church both on the national and on the local level. The faith community does not exist in a vacuum to hold on to the naïve belief that we are completely immune to what happens in other arenas of life, especially in the sociopolitical arena. This is the reason why Robert W. Edgar, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches, called the Christian community to focus on our true vocation at this moment. Edgar said, “**This election confirmed that we are a divided nation, not only politically but in terms of our interpretations of God’s will. We in the church must redouble our efforts to call all people of faith to affirm the values of both public morality and private piety. Regardless of who leads our country, the agenda of the church must always respond faithfully to the Bible’s timeless mandate to minister to the poor, the marginalized and the outcast; and to be seekers and makers of peace.**”

This is exactly why I think it is providential that we are commemorating **All Saints’ Day** this day. Because in the midst of competing sociopolitical ideologies that are claiming our loyalty as citizens and people of faith, we can pause to remember those men and women who made a difference

in our lives. Men and women who refused to glide along the surface of life taking their cues from the media, glib politicians or from a mass culture that makes people believe that there is just one way to be morally just and free. In our faith tradition, we call these people **saints**.

They are **saints** because they dared to look at the world around them with the eyes of faith and were able to see far beneath the drab surface of history, commerce, politics, religion and nature. And by doing so they came to the realization that, despite all the forces of irrationality and cruelty, life is still good and meaningful. As St. John Vianney said, **“the eyes of the world see no farther than this life, as mine see no farther than this wall when the church door is shut. The eyes of the Christian see deep into eternity.”** These followers of Christ indeed understood that we are all connected in a web of love and the whole universe is rooted and sustained in an eternal reality that, if all of us had the eyes to see, would at once awaken us from the dream of separateness.

Of course when we talk about **saints**, our minds are filled with images and stories of holy people whose life manifest so much godliness and Christian virtue that there is nothing recognizably human about them. But, the truth is that **saints** were real human beings. Suffering and hardship often marked their lives; but they refused to succumb to defeatism and hopelessness. In the midst of their pain and misery, these men and women were able to show compassion and generosity. They faced obstacles and adversities with faith and hope and they found joy in all things. They did not try to spiritualize Christ's

message to live well in a beautiful, but extremely challenging world. Every time they came up against the poor, the outcast, the hungry, against men and women sick with HIV/AIDS, and those who cry out for God's justice and love, they embraced them and proclaimed them to be blessed and happy. **Saints** are people who remind us of God; people whose love, courage, and faith seem to set them apart from the rest of us. However, they are not set apart from the rest of humankind as if they were above our ordinary humanity. Instead their lives show us what human beings ought to become. When we come across these people, we feel a greater sense of joy; we are more grateful to be alive, perhaps, more inspired to search for that inner spiritual illumination they have.

Frederick Buechner offers my favorite definition for the **saints**. He says, "**in his holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called saints.**" I like Buechner's poetic definition because it makes me think about these special human beings who come into our lives carrying a whiff of God's perfume - a certain fragrance of love that changes our whole outlook on life.

Mother Teresa was certainly one of those handkerchiefs that God dropped among us. She devoted her entire life to helping the least of God's children. She never turned a blind eye to any of the marginalized men, women and children she encountered in the name of security, economic interests or for religious reasons. She wasn't just a religious woman, but a mother in the true sense of the word. She showed an active, selfless and untiring commitment to share God's mercy, love and compassion with the people she served. Once, at

the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington D.C., Mother Teresa was introduced as **“the greatest woman in the world.”** When she got up to give her speech, she dismissed that introduction by saying that if she were the greatest woman in the world, people would think that God would have made her tall enough to see over the podium behind which she was standing. Then she added, **“I am nothing close to being the greatest woman in the world, but I will tell you the greatest thing about my life. I have been able to be a tiny pencil in the hand of God; someone through whom God writes love letters to the world.”** And as an instrument of God’s love, Mother Teresa understood, like all **saints** did, that the message of the Sermon on the Mount, or the Beatitudes, is not merely a moralizing religious discourse or a radical manual of Christian piety. She comprehended that whenever we give without counting the costs or calculating the return, we are learning to bear the fragrance of God’s love in the world.

Fortunately, it takes very little to become this “tiny pencil” in God’s hand and carry God’s love into the world. We may not be able to choose the circumstances that confront us, the choices that are available to help others, or the consequences that face us for making these choices. But we can choose to give the first step to respond to the needs of our neighbors. It may begin with an act of forgiveness or with the decision to listen to someone who is lonely. This first step may involve the acceptance of circumstances beyond our control or the recognition that not everything has to be perfect. Perhaps, we may have to ask ourselves each day the same questions that Henri Nouwen asked himself in his

journal. Nouwen wrote, **“Every day should be well lived. What a simple truth! Still, it is worth my attention. Did I offer peace today? Did I bring a smile to someone’s face? Did I say words of healing? Did I let go of my anger and resentments? Did I forgive? Did I love? These are the real questions!”** And if you can say “YES” to a few of these questions each day, then, with surprise and astonishment, you will realize that we too are fellow travelers with the **saints** of all times and places on this road to holiness. As we learn how to treat others as we would like them to treat us, we close the gap that separates us from those men and women we call **saints**. For the reality is that the majority of the people who bring God’s fragrance into our lives are not the so-called “canonized **saints**” who were heroes of the spiritual life. If things are not worse in the world and if we can see dots of light flashing in the darkness of human history, we owe that to the number of **saints** who live faithfully a hidden life or rest in unvisited tombs. To an extent, we are all **saints** “in the making.” At least this is my hope. The farther we travel on this road toward “holiness,” the more we become aware of our calling **“to do justice, love kindness and to walk humbly with [our] God”** (Micah 6:8). We begin to identify ourselves with the hungry, the sick, the naked, the homeless and with all God’s children regardless of their race, political convictions, sexual orientation or religious background.

So, this morning, as we remember those **saints** who brought the fragrance of God’s love into our lives and have now left to be with our Creator, let us embrace each other in love despite our seemingly irreconcilable sociopolitical views. For we are all traveling together, making our way toward our heavenly

home and, on this journey, we are not alone, but we remain in the good company of all the **saints** who are here today and also of those who were born to eternal life.

And as we remember the faithful departed, I would like to read to you a poem by Herman Hesse. This is one of my favorite poems and was translated by one of my best friends when we graduated from seminary and he returned to Switzerland. In my view, this poem speaks of our journey and our calling to be fully alive and it reminds me that not even death can separate us from one another, for it is in dying that we are born to life abundant.

Stages

As every flower withers and all youth makes place for old age,
So every stage of life blooms,
Blooms every grasp of truth, too, and every virtue in its day
And must not last forever.

At every call of life the heart must be prepared for leave-taking and new beginnings,

To give with bravery and without mourning
Itself to other and new relationships.

In every new start dwells a magic force
For guarding us and helping us to live.

Serenely let us move from place to place
And let no sentiments of home detain us.

The Cosmic Spirit seeks not to restrain us
But lifts us stage by stage to wider spaces.

As soon as we make a home of any stage of life
There is danger that we may lose vigor.

Only he who is ready for leave-taking and for travel,
May break away from the paralyzing fetters of permanence.

Perhaps, even at the our of our death
We are taken as children to fresh and newer places;
The call of life to us never ceases....
Oh well then, heart: bid farewell and heal!

By Herman Hesse

Translation: Thomas Dummermuth

The Rev. Paulo Gustavo França